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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MUSCAT 001635

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP, G/TIP AND DRL

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [ELAB](#) [SMIG](#) [MU](#)
SUBJECT: LABOR CAMPS FOR OMAN'S MIGRANT WORKERS

REF: A. MUSCAT 1575
[1](#)B. MUSCAT 1565

Classified By: Ambassador Gary A. Grappo, reasons 1.4 b/d.

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Poleoff visited two privately-operated labor camps for migrant workers in the Muscat area. Workers he met live in crowded rooms with poor sanitation, and reported that they work long hours for low monthly wages. Many are paying off debts to recruiting agencies in their home countries. Contacts state that some laborers have developed serious work-related illnesses, and that employer-provided health care is insufficient to cover the costs of treatment. Government officials contend that the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) actively inspects worksites and labor camps, but some admit - unofficially - that the Ministry lacks the resources and legal authority to effectively enforce compliance with Omani law. End summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Many companies in Oman's construction, cleaning and industrial sectors operate dormitory-style compounds - locally known as labor camps - in the Ghala industrial area near Muscat. These facilities house tens of thousands of workers who have been recruited and brought to Oman from South Asia. Contacts have reported that conditions in the camps vary widely, and that some workers live in substandard and unhealthy conditions. (Note: The author of a recent Human Rights Watch report outlining poor living conditions in the UAE for Dubai's construction workers suggested in regional media that laborers in Oman face similar hardships. End Note.) During the week of November 11, poleoff accompanied local advocates for low-skilled migrant workers on an unannounced visit to two of the Ghala labor camps. One of the camps is run by Airmech, a regionally-based engineering, building services and systems-maintenance company, while the other is managed by the construction company SARCO.

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Living Conditions
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[1](#)3. (C) Both the Airmech and SARCO camps were crowded and lacked proper sanitation. The advocates who accompanied poleoff stated, however, that conditions are worse in some other camps, and that Airmech runs one of the better facilities in the area. At Airmech, poleoff visited a room approximately 12 by 14 feet that housed 12 workers. The room had six bunk beds that lined opposite walls, a desk, shared shelving and a television. The common bathrooms were small, and peeling paint and decay on the toilet and shower stall doors suggested a lack of regular maintenance. Airmech's camp had a common mess hall, which appeared clean, and workers told poleoff that dinners generally consist of large

portions of rice with meat sauce.

¶4. (C) At the SARCO camp, living conditions for the company's low-skilled construction workers appeared to be worse. Poleoff visited one bunkhouse in which laborers lived 17 to a room. The bunkhouse was split into three such rooms, but poleoff observed only one exit at the far end of the building. There were no wardrobes or shelving in the rooms; the men instead hung their clothes on the end of their bunks. At the time of poleoff's visit, several workers were eating their dinner out of plastic bags without plates on the floor. Others were in various states of undress preparing to bathe. The common bathrooms were in poor condition, and workers had to walk across the dirt compound from their quarters to reach them.

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Wages, Compensation and Hours
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¶5. (C) Workers in both camps complained of long hours and low wages. While the legal minimum wage for Omani citizens is 120 Omani Riyals (OR) per month (USD 311), there is no set minimum for foreign workers. A carpenter at SARCO stated that he works from 7:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. for a salary of 70 OR/month (USD 180), plus a 15 OR/month food allowance. The company's low-skilled laborers, he said, are paid a base monthly salary of 55 OR (USD 142) plus 15 OR for food. (Note: Diplomats at the Indian Embassy subsequently said that SARCO's wages are in line with the contracts that the Indian mission regularly approves for its workers in Oman. End note.) The carpenter and his colleagues alleged, however, that they never receive the food allowance because the company withholds the amount as payment for the meals that it

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provides. In order to increase their monthly salary, the workers at SARCO claimed that they regularly log as many as 120 overtime hours per month. The carpenter stated that he often works five overtime hours per day at a rate of 300 bezas/hour (less than one US dollar) to increase his monthly salary to 100 OR. At the time of poleoff's visit, approximately 9:15 p.m., several laborers claimed that they only recently had returned from their worksites.

¶6. (C) The workers further stated that while SARCO provides medical insurance coverage of 5 OR/month, the company deducts all costs that exceed that amount from the worker's salary. (Note: This practice, if true, is illegal according to lawyers familiar with labor issues. End note.) Contacts among medical professionals who run a weekly free clinic for migrant workers later told poleoff that they see many individuals with serious, work-related ailments that require expensive treatment. These doctors assert that laborers have developed cement-dust allergies, repetitive motion problems, and skin diseases from extended exposure to the sun. The doctors also stated that stress related to poor work and living environments appear to exacerbate pre-existing conditions such as diabetes and hypertension. They were especially concerned that workers may avoid pursuing necessary treatment due to cost, as well as the fact that many companies do not provide sick days and allegedly deduct days missed due to illness from scheduled time off or the worker's salary.

¶7. (C) Several of the camp workers told poleoff that they feel compelled to work long hours to cover their debts to recruiting agencies. One laborer stated that he paid the equivalent of 400 OR (US 1,040) to an agency in India to bring him to Oman. (Note: Advocates report that many workers borrow the money from storefront lenders in their home countries who charge as much as 20-25% interest. End note.) Other workers alleged that they often have to work for at least two years, depending on their contract, to pay the principle and accrued interest on their debt. Residents of the Airmech and SARCO camps stated that the Omani branch of

the recruiting agency assigned them to a company upon arrival in Oman based on local labor demand, not based on a contract between the worker and a specific company. Some of the men complained further that their employers are paying them a salary less than that promised by the recruiting agency. These workers, however, claimed that they feel powerless to make a grievance.

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Government Response
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18. (C) Contacts in the Directorate of Labor Care at the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) stated officially that they believe the living and working conditions for Oman's migrant workers conform to Omani law and international standards. The MOM employs 82 inspectors, they said, who conduct at least one annual inspection of each labor camp and worksite. The MOM also maintains an office in the Ghala industrial area that is responsible for following up on worker complaints. Although they were unable to provide poleoff with statistics on the number of inspections conducted during the year or the number of violations that the inspectors uncovered, the Labor Care officials claimed that the MOM is enforcing Omani law. (Note: The government-owned newspaper al-Watan carried an article on November 18 stating that UN Special Rapporteur for Trafficking in Persons Sigma Huda had "praised" the conditions at a camp she visited for meeting international standards (ref A). Huda privately told the Ambassador that the government had arranged for her to see a "model camp," despite her request to make an unannounced visit to a camp of her choosing, and that the tour occurred during midday when laborers were away at their respective worksites. End note.)

19. (C) The Director General (DG) of Labor Care admitted later to poleoff, however, that conditions for migrant workers living in company-run labor camps are often poor, and that he does not have a complete picture of the extent of the problem. He cited, for example, a recent strike - successfully resolved by the Ministry - by Indian workers in a camp near the interior city of Nizwa to protest physical abuse and non-payment of wages. (Note: A lawyer with the Indian Embassy later confirmed that the sponsor agreed to meet worker demands, and that all but 30 of the workers decided to return to India. End note.) He said that the number of MOM inspectors is insufficient to conduct both scheduled and spot inspections, and that while the

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Directorate hopes to increase its number of inspectors, he did not expect this to be accomplished soon. He further stated that many of his inspectors are poorly trained and that Oman's existing occupational health and safety regulations, which were passed in 1982, are weak and outdated.

10. (C) The government's enforcement mechanisms are likewise weak, the DG confided. While the MOM can deny companies' applications for new workers if living and working conditions do not pass inspection, powerful companies often are able to resist government enforcement efforts. The DG said that he lacks the legal tools to go after companies or recruiting agencies that may be abusing migrant workers and/or changing the terms of their contracts, and that the Ministry only gets involved once workers have filed an official complaint. Finally, he claimed, it is difficult for his department to overcome the widespread belief among employers and government officials that greater oversight and enforcement are unnecessary, since most believe that the wages and conditions in Oman are better than the workers could expect in their home or other GCC countries.

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Comment
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¶11. (C) Despite recent positive changes to Omani labor laws under the U.S.-Oman Free Trade Agreement (ref B), migrant workers still lack comprehensive legal protections. Many may feel too vulnerable to claim the rights they do have as some sponsors allegedly threaten workers with deportation if they speak up. Local advocates are concerned that the government of Oman may not be fully aware of conditions in the labor camps in the absence of worker complaints or the rare strike like that which occurred near Nizwa. In a move to improve enforcement of labor regulations, source countries such as India and the Philippines are starting to negotiate agreements with Oman to certify worker contracts and monitor the actions of recruitment agencies. Diplomats in these embassies - as well as migrant worker advocates - will continue to look to the USG for help in advocating their cause.

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